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ABSTRACT

Arizona State University Service Learning students use the Electronic Forum to enhance their Service Learning experience. By requiring 2 entries a week as the writing component of their "ENG 484 Internship"--and counting it as 25% of their grades--students are given structured opportunities to reflect critically on their service experience. Through the Electronic Forum, teachers can create a virtual classroom where students' service internship and their course work intersect, with dramatic results. The teacher's role is to model mediation skills and teach critical thinking skills. Teachers using the Electronic forum should establish guidelines, control tone, and make the connection to the course work clear. Making full use of the potential electronic journaling offers requires thoughtful manipulation of the medium and a fair amount of time, but the goal--of social literacy--is worth the effort. (Journal entry instructions for 4 weeks are attached.) (RS)

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Effective reFlection
Using Computer Conferencing as the Writing Component
of a Service Learning Course

ASU Service Learning students use the Electronic Forum to enhance their Service Learning experience. By requiring two entries a week as the writing component of their ENG 484 Internship--and counting it as 25% of their grades--we're giving our students "structured opportunities . . . to reflect critically on their service experience" (Kendall et al 40). This is intended to help them to "develop a habit of critical reflection on their experiences, enabling them to learn more throughout life" (Kendall et al 38). Students who write about their service experiences are more aware of their changing ideas and skills, feel more connected to their classmates, and have an increased sense of their importance to the Service Learning Project and their community (Conrad and Hedin 89). But, as important as electronic journaling is to our students' personal development, that's not its only benefit.

Service Learning teachers can also use the Electronic Forum to enhance students' academic experiences. The additional reading and writing requirement improves students' basic skills, reinforces their comprehension of the companion course's subject matter, helps students to apply new ideas, and to see the interrelationships between disciplines. Effective prompts challenge students to improve their critical thinking and problem solving skills, and help them learn how to learn experientially (Conrad and Hedin 88).

Through the Electronic Forum, we can create a virtual classroom where our students' service internship and their course work intersect, with dramatic results.

Computer Assisted Instruction: Pro's & Con's of the Medium

Sibylle Gruber, in "Re: Ways We Contribute: Students, Instructors, and Pedagogies in the Computer Mediated Writing Classroom," mentions the following benefits of electronic communication, but she also considers the medium's drawbacks:

PRO's = creates a **DEMOCRATIC** virtual classroom

- It's a **student**-centered learning strategy
- Every voice on-line is **equally weighted**
- **Errors** are okay
- Creates a real **rhetorical** situation (real subject/audience)
- It's more **composed** than face-to-face or classroom discussion
- There's more **freedom** to express ideas (no immediate criticism)

CON's = center around on-line **AUTHORITY** issues

- For one thing, there's **not** necessarily **equal** participation
- Some students will **resent** the assignment
- Some are **scared** of computers or have no easy **access**
- Then there's the **loud mouth** who'll try to dominate the discussion
- Others will be **unwilling** to disclose personal feelings

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Most of these tensions are caused by the medium's democratic nature. Students feel freer to use informal language and there is less teacher authority (in the classroom my students usually refer to me as Ms. Kelly; on

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the Forum I'm invariably "Jan"). Almost all students will use a lot more slang; sometimes a little swearing goes on, and there's potential for worse (such as insults or hostile comments).

The Teacher's Role:

This makes the teacher's role on the Electronic Forum very important. We can:

1. **Model** Mediation Skills
- Use discussion to help students **resolve conflicts**
- Demonstrate **tolerance**/allow for complexity
  (not every problem will be solved; it's okay to disagree)

2. Teach **Critical Thinking** Skills
- **Use conflict**/dissent to teach students to think critically
- Ask questions that will allow students to **critique society**

Methodology:

There are several methods we can use to accomplish this kind of instruction. But there are also some things we *shouldn't* do:
- Avoid grading entries, for instance. Entries should be on time to be of most value to the students and their classmates, but don't worry too much about the length or substance of any one entry.
- And avoid making judgmental statements on-line. You don't want to limit or suppress speech--within FCC limitations, of course!
- I also think it's a good idea for teachers to make the same two entries as everyone else. It's fine to visit the forum site more frequently than your students, but make a point not to dominate the discussions.

On the other hand, teachers must exert a subtle, pervasive control over the Forum to maintain a friendly, "safe" environment that fosters learning:

1. Establish **guidelines** from the beginning.
   - Open your forum with a prompt that spells out your expectations and goals.
   - Give your students explicit guidelines for using the Electronic Forum.
2. Control **tone**:
   - Use **headings**--they call attention to the fact that it's YOU talking
   - Use **length** to your advantage. Most electronic entries tend to be "short and sweet." Your prompts will have more authority if you use your word processor to create (and save) more extensive, polished texts that you can upload each semester onto the forum.
   - Use **prompts** that guide students' discussion and set the desired tone
     Students' two weekly entries can be half in response to you and half open discussion
3. Make the connection to the **course work** clear--make the reflection relevant to **both** the internship and the classroom.
   - **Don't repeat** class discussions here; EF prompts should **amplify** and expand/ask for **applications** of ideas /or **prepare** students for class assignments:
   - Ask students to **brainstorm**, share ideas, suggest topics for essays
   - Provide **models:** essay examples, excerpts, outlines, research data, sample citations
   - Add **reading assignments** to provide a **larger perspective** (i.e. *Call to Service* by Robert Coles)

Making full use of the potential electronic journaling offers us requires thoughtful manipulation of the medium and a fair amount of time. But the goal--of social literacy--is worth the effort. The Forum is the "place" where students learn to think critically in a social context--and that's Service Learning at its best.

Works Cited

Conrad, Dan, and Diane Hedin. "Learning from Service: Experience Is the Best Teacher--Or Is It?" In *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service* Vol. II. Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1990. 87-96.

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To: All ENG 484 Students in ENG 217
RE: Week two on EF (Week one was your first training entry)

Congratulations to all of you for making it this far! I think you'll find EF gets easier to use every week, and I know you'll find our discussions here interesting--to say the least.

This forum gives ENG 484 students an excellent way to use writing to develop our understanding of ourselves and others. The communication that goes on here will have a slightly different "flavor" than the discussions we have in class or on the site.

Part of this is due to the medium--there are no faces to look at when we talk here. And part is due to the process; most of you will write as you think here, typing your ideas right onto the screen. Writing on the Electronic Forum is a kind of "public" journaling.

As with other kinds of journal writing, this is essentially non-graded. You really don't need to worry about spelling or grammatical correctness here. If you make your two weekly entries on the forum--one in response to the prompt I'll post here every week, and one entry to query or reply to one of your classmates and fellow tutors on your "site" forum--you'll earn full credit for this portion of your ENG 484 grade. Just make sure your entries are on-time, thoughtful and of substantial length.

There will be some reading assignments for ENG 484, as well. In your Student Manual you'll find several excerpts from the book, *The Call of Service*, by Robert Coles. Before you answer this week's prompt, read "Community Service" in your Tutor Manual (it's the first entry from Coles' book). Then either today or some time this week (by Sun 2/2) post your response to these questions:

1. What motivates the two college students Cole writes about to work with inner city kids? What are YOUR motivations for becoming a Service Learning tutor?

2. The first college junior said he tried to convince the kids he tutored that "there's a better life for them to lead if they'll only study and do well in school" despite the fact that "they're not 'into' school: it's not their idea of something that will lead to anything."

The other college student said she pushed her kids to learn conventional spelling and usage to "give them some connection to the world of literacy." She kept "reminding them and herself that jobs would eventually be at stake, and a distinctly improved standard of living."

What do YOU hope to accomplish in the lives of the children you'll be tutoring?

3. The first college junior was convinced that, despite all the obstacles, "one person could give direction to another in a classroom, on a playground." The other college student was told by a mother: "You ARE changing the world!"

Realistically, how much effect do you think YOU'LL have on the kids you tutor? Can we really shape or influence another person's future? Should we even try?

To respond to this prompt now, you can type either WRITE or REPLY. Make sure to save your response with a Control X and name it (pick a "subject"). Write another separate forum entry on your site forum (f habitat OR f yes)discussing our training sessions or site orientations--anything that's related to your tutoring--and you've met the EF requirement for the week!

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To: ENG 484 Students in ENG 217
RE: Week three on EF

Well, is EF getting easier to use every week? Just think how "literate" these courses are making you--now you're computer literate, too, right? Right?

Asking for input from your classmates or responding to one of their questions ON YOUR SITE FORUM will satisfy half of this week's EF requirement. After you've done that, post your response to these questions ON THIS ENG 217 FORUM as your second EF entry for this week:

Read "Juan's Story," the second excerpt from Robert Coles' book, THE CALL OF SERVICE in your Student Manual (the story of Gary, a "Big Brother," and a boy named Juan that begins "We take walks").

Gary talks about the irony of how much he's benefited from working with Juan, because as he attempts to give Juan "some direction" in life, Gary's also learning more about his own values, and "the more I say what I think, what I believe-well, the more I really do believe it!"

1. What are some of the values your parents taught you? What values are you displaying as you work as a Service Learning tutor?

Gary had to grope "hard to clarify his own beliefs and values so that he could try to stand by them in his conversations with Juan." Gary wants Juan "to pick my values, when he's facing a choice, rather than those he gets from the street and, I hate to say it, at home."

2. What do you think about trying to impress your values on someone else's child--or anyone else, for that matter? Do you feel that this is one of your goals as a tutor?

I'm enjoying your responses to last week's prompt on your motivations. Keep up the good work!

To: ENG 484 Students in ENG 217
RE: Week four on EF

Half of each week's EF requirements are filled whenever you ask for input from one of your classmates or when you answer someone else's question or comment. Any time you read an entry you'd like to respond to just type "reply" or "write." Make sure to save this entry (control X) SEPARATELY from your response to my weekly prompt. You need to make TWO entries each week to fulfill your ENG 484 writing component.

Usually these two entries will be on different forums (site issues will be discussed on your site forum, and 217 material will be discussed here on our ENG217 forum) But let's focus JUST on this kind of exchange this week.

Post TWO entries by the end of this week; in one entry state your own experiences or questions, in the other entry comment on another student's experiences or questions. Make sure to post ONE entry on EACH forum again this week, but it doesn't matter which entry goes on which forum.

Consider the following questions as a way of deciding what you want to say. They are intended to help you reflect on your experiences and get the most out of your tutoring AND your EF "journal" writing.

1. Describe what you're doing in your volunteer service this week. Describe your reactions and your kid's reactions to what you're doing.

2. Describe any feedback you got from the graduate interns at your site, your fellow tutors, or the site personnel this week.

3. Describe your feelings and attitudes about your tutoring as you begin this semester's service. What kind of changes have you experienced already?

4. Describe what you've learned so far.

5. Describe what you would have changed about any of last week's activities or interactions.

6. Describe the things that are bothering you or important things that you are thinking about.

7. Describe the best things that have happened during your tutoring so far.

To: ENG 484 Students in ENG 217
RE: Week eight on EF

Please make another two entries--one in response to my questions here and one on your site forum--by the end of this week.

Let's do some invention work for the Research-Based Personal Essay:

Persuasion essays usually require some library research, and education makes an excellent topic for academic research. In addition, you've been doing a lot of "experiential" research. A persuasion essay can be very gratifying to research and write if you pick an issue that has come to your attention during your work as a tutor.

Last semester, my students researched these areas (among others): self-esteem and its connections to learning, parental involvement, "tracking" of students, bilingual education, sex education, values clarification, teacher efficacy and discipline issues.

I'd like to draw on the work of one of my previous students--Larry Jones--as a model of research and investigation into one issue related to education. Larry used ideas he found in three sources to argue that the way schools and teachers treat minority students affects their self esteem and performance in school.

Here's his Works Cited page (note: journal titles should be underlined or italicized. Also note the second entry by Susan Phillips. Since her article is published in a quarterly or yearly journal, the volume number is included and the date is presented differently).

Cafritz, Peggy Cooper. "Spike, Seriously." *Elle* 5 Jan. 1994: 22.

Phillips, Susan. "Racial Tensions in Schools." *CQ Researcher* 4.1 (Spring 1994): 1-21.

Sherwood, Jane. "Teaching Tolerance." *Canada and the World* Oct. 1993: 78-79.

The issue Larry investigated was how one's race affects one's education, specifically, how "outside influences are distancing many black males . . . from orthodox education" (Jones 1). Here's what Larry discovered from these sources:

Jane Sherwood states, "There is an anti-black bias in the school system" (78). She cites the percentages of students taking college preparatory courses in high school: 76% of the students of Asian descent and 65% of the white students were enrolled in advanced courses, compared to only 45% of the black students. Instead, a much higher percentage of black students "were enrolled in basic level courses that lead neither to university nor community college" (Sherwood 78).

Sherwood says the reason is:

> Most black students have only been exposed to a course of study designed for white, middle class kids. It has no relevance for them. It has no black content. So, the vast majority of young black people latch on to the idea that school work is intended for those people the lessons are about. (78)

Susan Phillips argues that some black students' lower academic performance can be linked to their teachers' lower expectations for them. She says white teachers may have "negative racial stereotypes" and that "it is not surprising, then, that by the time black children complete elementary grades, they often are disenchanted with school, unsure of their own abilities and achieving less than they should" (15).

Spike Lee, on the other hand, thinks the black community is at fault. He says:

> The value system has been turned upside down to where . . . if young black kids strive to get straight A's and speak proper English, they're ridiculed for being white. . . . if you're intelligent and you're smart, that means you're soft. . . . Stuff has been twisted. (qtd. in Cafritz 22)

1. Can you identify and challenge any of the assumptions these authors hold? Remember, every writer has a bias. Even though both Sherwood and Phillips base their statements on "evidence," do you think they've made some interpretive "leaps"? And what about Spike Lee--he's making quite a broad generalization, isn't he?

2. Persuasion requires a debatable thesis, evidence as support, and a presentation and refutation of opposing views. Do you AGREE with any of the statements these authors make? Do you DISAGREE with any of their statements? Do you have any EVIDENCE from your own experience or from your work at the tutoring site to support your opinion?

3. What issue in education would you like to research for a persuasion essay? Why would you select this issue?